

**what I talk about  
when I talk about poetry**



**Tom Corrado**



*The question is, said Alice,  
whether you can make words  
mean so many different things.*  
- Lewis Carroll

*for Howard, who asked . . .*

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that poetry is aural sex. That poetry is my erotic other. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession. That it began slowly. As a curiosity. An appreciation. Then, one day, it became more. A captivation. A seduction. That I had been seduced by the sound of words; by the sounds words make when they engage.

2. I write poetry because I cannot not write poetry.

3. I write to a hazy muse, prompted by words I read or hear.

4. I don't know what I'm doing or how I do what I do, but I know that I feel compelled to do it and to keep doing it. I have fun doing it, and I keep doing it until I reach that point with a poem where I either say "uncle" or "yes, this is kinda good! I like it!"

5. I continue to pump out poems despite having days when I feel it's all worthless crap, stringing words together with the pompous notion that they're akin to a piece of classical music. Just let the words, the sounds, the images wash over you, pass through

you, kind of like meditation -  
in and out.

6. It's tough to read something  
without trying to make sense  
of it. Without trying to  
understand it. Without trying  
to figure out what it means. I  
guess we're wired for that.  
Aren't we "here" to make sense  
of the world?

7. Most people are  
uncomfortable with ambiguity.

8. All my "art" - writings,  
paintings, sculptures, musical  
improvisations - is an attempt  
to engage ambiguity. Not  
necessarily to make sense of it,  
or to try to extract meaning  
from it, but simply to embrace  
it. To massage it. To have fun  
with it. To play with it. To  
"create" something from it.

9. In a letter to her sister-in-  
law, Susan Gilbert, Emily  
Dickinson wrote "subjects  
hinder talk." I like that. I'd  
rather not pick a subject. I'd  
rather play with  
indeterminacy, thereby better  
inviting the collaboration of  
the reader or listener into the  
experience of a poem.

10. I relish Barthes's notion  
from *The Death of the Author*  
(1967) of the "the reader as

writer," imposing his/her meaning on a writer's words.

11. In 2005, my co-coordinator of a poetry group at a local library asked me to write something about my poetry for the library newsletter. Here's what I wrote:

"We blunder along. Trying to make sense of it all. Trying to connect the dots. Imposing meaning on the endless parade of impressions, the constant flow of images. Thinking and discovering and remembering and forgetting. Using our limited tool of language to convey our thoughts, to spin our yarns. I'm trying to portray this in my poetry, filling my poems with haphazard memories, scraps of conversation, the inner mumbo-jumbo of the mind, life's buzzing distractions. I'm not interested in linearity, in telling a story, in dispensing bromides, in picture-perfect representation.

That's why I like Ashbery so much! He dips into his stream of consciousness, and pulls something out. In many ways, this is a lot easier than using one's experiences as a basis for a poem.

So, I can start my engine with nothing more than a phrase, an expression, whatever. If I'm really blocked, I'll pull out Ashbery or Carson or Hejinian or Nelson or any piece of writing for that matter and read something to prime my pump. I don't have to search through my experiential suitcase to find something to write about - my first grade teacher, the death of my cat, whatever - although I have done that. I don't feel I have to tell a story - though a few fellow poets insist that my poems - however surreal sometimes - are stories."

12. I like to think that art should stand on its own, but I can't help but look behind the curtain for information about the artist, how they lived, how they did their thing, how they weathered life's ups and downs.

13. Most of my stuff is not autobiographical, though there are those who would argue that anything anyone writes is autobiographical since the writer in writing is putting his or her unique spin on something. Indeed, the writer has to have had some perception of something - real or imagined - before he or she can transform it or transcribe



it into written form. The writer is a filter.

#### 14. poem as world

“... a poem is a place where conscious and unconscious thought, reality and dream, fact and symbol all jostle for attention on the same busy stage.” - Dan Chiasson, reviewing Robyn Schiff's, *A Woman of Property*, *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2016

#### 15. what was I looking for?

“I wasn't always sure. What I found myself responding to, what continued to compel me, was precision and surprise. Memorable lines, craft deployed. Poems I could not shake, texts that arrested me. Poems that demonstrated a certain kind of thinking, imagistic or metaphorical thinking, poetic inquiry. Literary investigations, obsessions, intelligence. Emotional accuracy. Poems written under pressure, poems in which something dramatic is at stake, at risk, for the speaker, who would not be deterred. A kind of ruthless authenticity. Poems that take themselves to task. Poems in which something spooky or unsuspected happens in

language, poems that stood up to rereading, experiences I could not forget, the happiness and suffering of others. I found many poems of grief and lamentation, but also erotic poems of celebration, comic poems of wild hilarity, joy." - Edward Hirsch, *What Is the Task?* American Poetry Review, September/October 2016

16. "Writers, like all of us, carry around a lot of quirky, trivial, nostalgic, random, or otherwise hard-to-classify stuff in their heads, and who are we as readers to deny them this reserve fund, even if we can ever only partially share their frames of reference?" - James Gibbons, reviewing John Ashbery's *Breezeway*, hyperallergic.com, July 12, 2015

17. poetry 102?

Shouldn't poetry take risks?  
Shouldn't it "make it new?"  
Shouldn't it expose our  
vulnerabilities? Our secrets?  
Our innermost thoughts?  
Shouldn't it do more than feed  
the status quo? More than  
entertain? Inform? Clarify? I  
say yes! I say poets should  
walk a greased tightrope. They  
should take chances, push the  
envelope. I like poets who  
prestidigitate words; who

massage them; who work them in new, different, sometimes odd, uncomfortable ways. I like poets who are non-sequiturists; who play with words, pull them out of a hat, push them around, mix them into unconventional, but tasty, stews. I admire poets who are unafraid to move beyond the literal; who toggle between the real and the surreal; who try to mimic the process of thinking; who attempt to portray the experience of experience. In other words, I'm fascinated not so much by what poets say but how they say it. I'm interested in texture and tone and musicality. I like to think that open-ended poems or fragmented poems or just plain weird poems better invite the collaboration and participation of the reader's or listener's imagination into the experience of the poem.

18. very new poetry?

In his essay, *How to Read, and Perhaps Enjoy, Very New Poetry*, (The Believer, 2004), Harvard Professor Stephen Burt tells us that Very New Poetry:

- does not tell a story
- is hard or impossible to paraphrase

- teases, demands, frustrates
- incorporates data from a range of realms
- weds subjective (internal) and objective (external) realities
- tries to capture the random, irregular nature of experience
- mixes tragedy, whimsy, indifference, cheerfulness
- appears simultaneously attached and detached
- brings together diverse voices and sources
- consists of free-floating, discrete, seemingly unrelated lines with few transitionals
- uses sincere, non-ironic straight talk or everyday language
- is indeterminate and open-ended
- presents nonlinear declarations
- has a fragmented, interrupted, choppy rhythm
- moves away from the literal
- focuses on artifice (and personality) at the expense of sincere or natural speech
- leaps - as a person's thoughts do - from topic to topic
- mixes the real and the surreal

19. Further, Burt suggests that when reading Very New Poetry:

- don't look for a story
- don't get hung up on trying to figure out what the poem

means or what the poet is  
trying to say  
- don't fight the poem, let your  
imagination interact and  
collaborate with it  
- accept irrationality  
- look for a persona and a  
world  
- enjoy the words, the  
wordplay, the double meanings,  
the images, the sounds  
- look for self-descriptive or  
for frame-breaking moments,  
when the poem stops to tell you  
what it describes  
- let the poem wash over you.

20. In her introduction to *The  
Best American Poetry 1990*,  
Jorie Graham reminds us that  
Very New Poems:

“... do not let us become  
comfortable with plot, point of  
view, setting; eventually force  
us to read in a different way;  
force us to let music take the  
place of narrative flow; force  
us to let our senses do some of  
the work we would “normally”  
be letting our conscious minds  
do. We discover, in the process,  
that we can trust a deeper  
current of our sensibility,  
something other than the lust-  
for-forwardness, with all its  
attendant desires for closure,  
shapeliness, and the sense that  
we are headed somewhere and  
that we are in the hands of

something. We are forced to  
suspend these desires, to let  
the longing stay alive  
unsatisfied; forced to accord  
power to a portion of ourselves  
and a portion of the world we  
normally deem powerless or  
feminine or 'merely' intuitive."

21. In the Hall (House?) of  
Mirrors (Glass?)

*How did her life live itself  
without her?*

- Jonathan Safran Foer

Sketch the images in the  
mirrors to preserve them.  
To show them to others.  
To share them.  
Sketch them quickly.  
The way your art teacher had  
you do it.  
Forget about getting it right.  
(Whatever that is.)  
Forget perfection.  
You have 20 minutes.  
For what?  
Never mind, just sketch.  
Do any of the images remind  
you of people you know?  
People you knew?  
People who play - or played - a  
role in your drama?  
Think about the people and  
their delicate lives.  
How their delicate lives  
impacted your delicate life.  
How your delicate life  
impacted their delicate lives.

How whatever they did  
impacted whatever you did.  
Whatever you chose to do.  
Don't point a finger.  
You are the architect of you.  
You are how you are.  
Not how you should be  
or could be.

But are.

*The Captain of Your Soul*

*Captain America.*

*O Captain! My Captain!*

*Captain Midnight.*

*Captain Morgan.*

*Captain Hook.*

*The Captain and Tennille.*

Keep sketching, please.

Are you beginning to recognize  
the people in the images?

They're in there.

And if you can, think about the  
questions.

What questions?

The questions you've written on  
index cards.

Think about the order of  
questions.

The questions you've been  
dying to ask the people.

The people in the images.

The people you know.

The people you knew.

The people you don't know but  
would like to know.

Irrespective of how shallow  
the questions may seem.

How seemingly shallowly  
secular.

But isn't there another way?

No, this is the only way.

You wanted feedback, yes?  
Doesn't everyone want  
feedback?

*How am I doing?*

*How do I look?*

*Do you like what I've done?*

*Where am I going?*

*When will I get there?*

*How will I know when I've  
gotten there?*

You've come here to ask the  
questions.

To ask the people in the images  
the questions.

The questions on the index  
cards.

Surreptitiously?

Perhaps, but necessary.

Wait. I think I see a dog in one  
of the images.

Perfectly acceptable.

What?

Animals are perfectly  
acceptable images.

Yes, it's a pit bull. It's his/her  
pit bull.

A white pit bull with  
a black eye.

He/she called him Joe or Joseph  
or something like that.

Friendly.

Please. Keep sketching.





swimming in happenstance press

tjcl23@midtelnet  
scriptsfortoday.blogspot.com

2018

